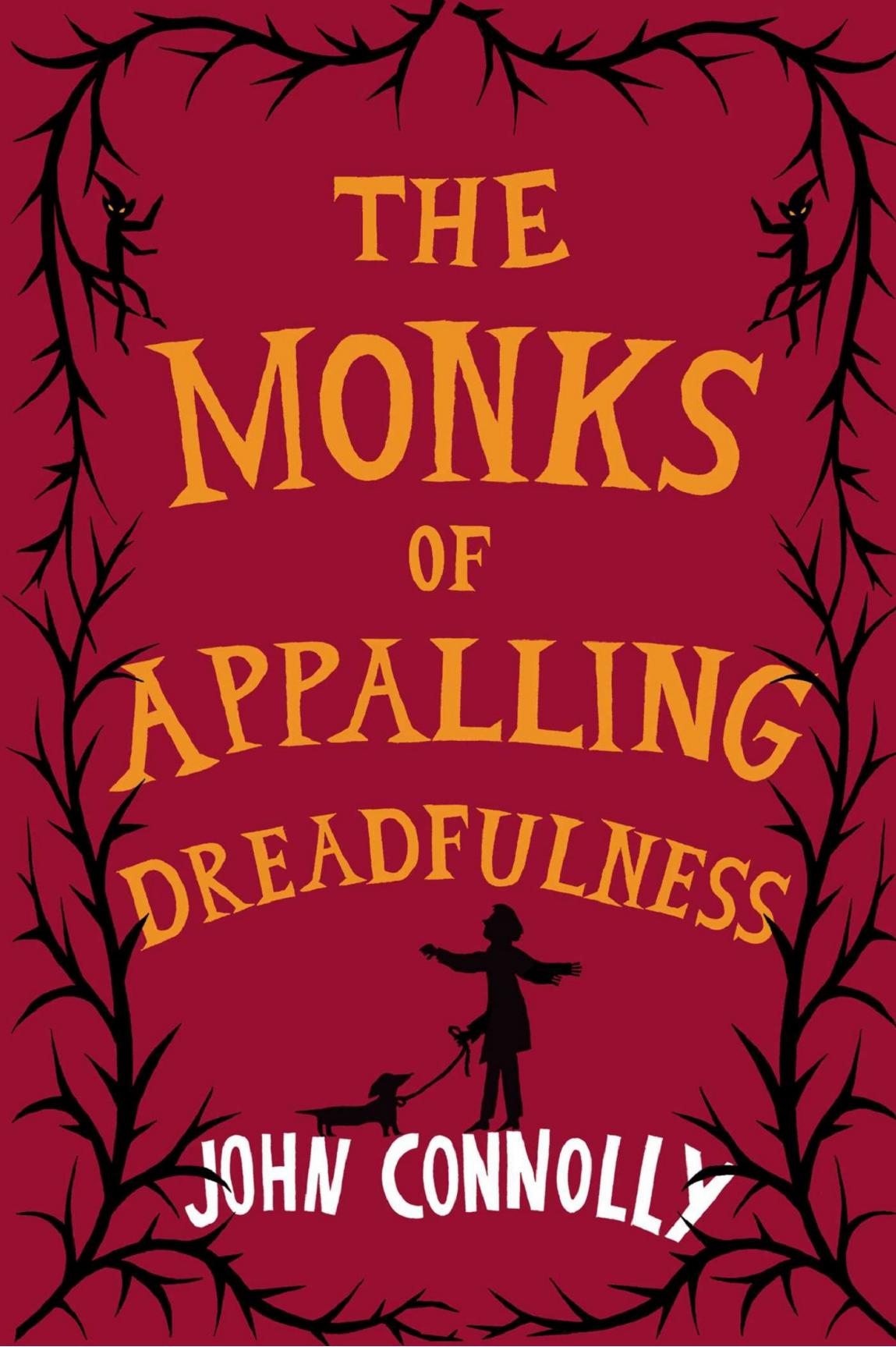


THE
MONKS
OF
APPALLING
DREADFULNESS



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THE MONKS OF APPALLING DREADFULNESS

A SHORT STORY

John Connolly

EMILY BESTLER BOOKS

—
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I

In Which We Are Reunited Some Time After the Appearance of the Last Volume. You Look Lovely, By the Way. What Have You Done to Your Hair?

The knight was wearing very shiny armor. It wasn't just the sort of shininess that comes from hours of buffing, aided by large dollops of *Mistress Dolly's All-Purpose Miracle Polish and Unguent*.¹ Oh no, this was a deep, ingrained gleam, a "Look at me!" radiance. The wearer could have fallen down a mine shaft, landed in oil, been set on fire, and still have emerged from the whole affair with the sun bouncing off his helm and breastplate, his cuisses and greaves.² His armor was shiny and clean in a way that demanded to be noticed, just as some people really, really want you to know how good they are, or how good they think they are, and never miss an opportunity to advertise it. The armor made you want to kick the person wearing it really hard, even at the risk of breaking a toe. It was a very, very annoying assemblage of bits of metal, and it suited the wearer because he was very, very annoying, too.

The knight's name was Sir Magnific the Outstanding. He hadn't been born Magnific—his real name was Reg—but a lifetime of being unrelentingly good, and always where this goodness would be spotted by the maximum number of people, had resulted in a knighthood and a change of name. Sir Magnific the Outstanding traveled the land with his squire, Orlic the Resigned, rescuing maidens, righting wrongs, and generally making a nuisance of himself, since not all maidens want to be rescued and wrongness is often simply a matter of opinion.³

Sir Magnific the Outstanding was currently seated on his horse, Button. Sir Magnific was smiling the way only someone who is really proud of what he's just done can smile, all teeth and smugness. Button the horse, meanwhile, was not smiling. It's hard to appear happy while a bloke wearing fifty pounds of metal is plonked on your back—a bloke, what's more, who has never been known to say no to a pie.

Before Sir Magnific stood a man dressed in very raggedy rags and an apron that could only have been filthier if it had actually been made of dirt. A cloud of flies buzzed around the man's head. Occasionally one of them would land on his hair or skin and think to itself, "Oh, this is a bit of all right, isn't it? Couldn't ask for a more feculent, unsanitary place to lay a few eggs than here—" before promptly dying.

The man's name was Peasant. He came from a long line of peasants, all called Peasant, so he was Peasant Peasant, although he had recently worked himself up from Peasant to Chief Peasant. He was very nice to those around him, and was therefore a Pleasant Chief Peasant Peasant. Sir Magnific the Outstanding, though, was testing his patience. Sir Magnific had turned up earlier that morning at the castle gates, spouting some nonsense about righting wrongs and rescuing maidens. He had then proceeded to hit anyone who disagreed with him very hard until they either started agreeing with him or handed in their dinner pail.⁴ As a result, the castle was now in flames, the prince had a fatal dent in his head, and Peasant and his fellow peasants—to only some of whom Peasant was actually related—were stuck out in the cold watching a lunatic on a white horse shining brightly while behind him a castle burned.

"You are free," said Sir Magnific the Outstanding to Peasant and the other assorted peasants. "You are no longer condemned to a life of servitude. Go, and be happy."

"Go where?" said Peasant. He liked it here, or had until Sir Magnific arrived and began setting fire to stuff.

"Anywhere," said Sir Magnific the Outstanding. "The world is your oyster."

"What's an oyster?" said Peasant.

"It's a sort of fishy thing," said Sir Magnific, "except without eyes or skin. Lives in a shell. Slimy. You have to swallow it in one go because it tastes a bit

horrible if you let it hang about in your mouth, and if you eat a bad one, you'll get sick and most likely die."

Peasant looked doubtful.

"I don't think I want my world to be an oyster," he said. "How about a piece of stale bread, with most of the green bits cut off, and maybe some only-slightly-rancid water?"

Now it was Sir Magnific the Outstanding's turn to look dubious.

"But 'The world is your piece of stale bread, green bits optional, and stinky water' doesn't sound right."

"Better than an oyster," said one of Peasant's fellow peasants.

"How about a bun?" suggested another peasant. "'The world is your bun.' Stands to reason. Everyone likes a bun."

"The world is your *bum*?" said a man at the back, who couldn't hear terribly well due to the absence of fifty percent of his ears.⁵

"Not *your* bum," said his neighbor. "*His* bum."

"Oh, I was worried for a moment," said the man with one ear. He stared at Sir Magnific in admiration. "I bet his bum sparkles."

Sir Magnific the Outstanding's grin was struggling to stay fixed.

"It doesn't matter!" he shouted. "It's just a figure of speech."

"The arsonist on the horse is right," said a woman with one eye.⁶ "It doesn't matter whose bum it is."

"Easy for you to say," said the man with one ear. He held up his arms. At the end of each was a hook. "I have to dip these in a bucket after cleaning mine."⁷

"Now look here," said Sir Magnific the Outstanding, who was getting quite annoyed. "That's enough talk of bums. What's important is that you are free. You are no longer serfs. I, Sir Magnific, have freed you."

"But I liked my life," said Peasant. "One square meal a day, weevils optional; a roof over my head—or most of a roof, but no point in nit-picking, is there? Except for actual nits."

He dug a nit out of his hair and showed it to Sir Magnific before deciding not to let the protein go to waste.

"What am I supposed to do now?" said Peasant, once he'd finished nibbling on the nit.

“You can find a proper job,” said Sir Magnific the Outstanding.

“There *are* no proper jobs. The only jobs were in the castle, and you’ve burned that down.”

“It’s only fire damage,” said Sir Magnific the Outstanding. “You can probably get some work rebuilding it.”

To his rear, the main tower of the castle groaned, like an old man getting up from a chair, before—also like certain old men—toppling over. The rest of the castle quickly followed, collapsing in a massive cloud of dust and smoke. The pile of rubble slowly settled. Peasant looked not entirely unhappy. After all, this represented a lot of rebuilding.

“I suppose we—” he began, when the ground shook and the remains of the castle disappeared into the bowels of the earth, leaving behind a massive crater.

“Perhaps we can dig it out,” said Peasant—whose glass was always half full, even if it wasn’t always half full of anything a sensible person might want to drink—as a huge fireball erupted from the crater, sending more wreckage soaring into the sky. A helmet landed at Peasant’s feet, smoking gently. It had once belonged to a guard named Horace. Peasant knew this because Horace’s head was still in the helmet, looking surprised. This was to be expected, under the circumstances, since nobody wakes up in the morning with the expectation that the day—and, for that matter, life itself—might conclude with his head being separated from his body before being shot into some woods. If you knew that was going to happen, you’d stay in bed.

“Oh, that’s just great,” said Peasant, as the fireball dispersed. “Vandalism, that is. Someone could fall in that hole and do himself a mischief.”

“Listen,” said Sir Magnific, “I’ll do you a mischief—”

Which was when a flash flashed, as flashes will, and a bang banged. At the back of the crowd, someone coughed. Although it was a polite cough, it carried a definite threat. It wasn’t a cough to be ignored, not unless you wanted a Very Bad Thing to befall you—possibly lots of Very Bad Things, some of them with spikes on the end. The crowd of peasants and Peasants quickly parted, leaving a channel of communication between Sir Magnific and the source of the cough.

Three figures stood in a clearing: one tall, one slightly less tall, and one very short. Of the trio, he would definitely always be the last to learn it was raining.

They wore the long gray robes of monks, the hoods raised ominously. No faces were visible under the hoods, but anyone foolish enough to look hard enough might just have glimpsed wrinkles, blackness, and boundless evil before being killed.

The tallest of the monks removed his hands from his sleeves—well, removed his talons, really, since they were long, thin, scaly, and sharp. The talons were in the process of unrolling a length of thick parchment.

"Sir Magnific the Outstanding?" said a voice from somewhere in the depths of the First Monk's robes. It rumbled unpleasantly, like an avalanche limbering up to roll down a mountain.

Sir Magnific might not have been the brightest bulb in the box, but he had the feeling that the monk wasn't about to tell him he'd won a prize. On the other hand, it didn't seem wise to deny that he was who he was a) just in case he *had* won a prize; b) because monks didn't materialize randomly in the vague hope that whoever they were looking for might happen to be there; and c) because if he tried to lie, the unhappy peasantry before him would probably call him on the fib.

"Er, yes," said Sir Magnific. "I am he."

"Not for much longer," said the First Monk.

"Beg your pardon?"

"You're a do-gooder," said the Third Monk menacingly. **"We don't like do-gooders."**

The First and Second Monks turned to stare at him. The Third Monk stared back.

"Well," said the Third Monk, **"we don't."**

"We don't like interrupters either," said the Second Monk.

"Sorry," said the Third Monk. **"I got carried away in the moment."**

"He's an enthusiast," explained the First Monk. **"Some of us just are. My old granddad was exactly the same way. Never saw a skull he didn't want to crush or a torso he didn't want to disembowel. He was a lovely fella."** The First Monk wiped a tear from somewhere approximating an eye. **"Mind you, that was why we had to kill him, because he had trouble telling the difference between family**

and everyone else. It might have been his eyesight, but you never knew with him. One minute you're all sitting around the table together, happy as the day is long, enjoying a nice brew and a slice of cake, and the next minute Auntie Olive's head is missing and Cousin Albert is bleeding all over the Victoria sponge. I mean, enthusiasm is all well and good, but you have to draw the line somewhere, don't you?"

The First Monk paused.

"Beg pardon," he said, "where were we?"

"We were telling Sir Magnific," said the Second Monk pointedly, "how we don't like do-gooders." His tone of voice suggested that perhaps the time had come for a new First Monk if the old First Monk was finding it difficult to concentrate on matters of importance.

"Right, of course. Sir Magnific."

"Still here," said Sir Magnific, and gave the crowd a good-humored look as if to say, "Well, what are you going to do, eh, if monkish-looking chaps start popping up and arguing amongst themselves? One can but smile politely..."

"By the powers vested in us," said the First Monk, "in accordance with the Doomsday Prophecies, the Cthonic Concordat, and any and all Infernal Dictats and Transdimensional Laws passed or yet to be passed, you, Sir Magnific the Outstanding, have been sentenced to death. Sign here, please."

The First Monk flicked the scroll until the end hovered just below Sir Magnific's nose.

"Wait, what?" said Sir Magnific.

"You forgot the quill," hissed the Second Monk.

"Oh, bother," said the First Monk. He rummaged in his left sleeve. A bat flew out, followed by a relieved-looking dodo, half a packet of digestive biscuits, a mug without a handle, a handle, and a small silver cup bearing the engraving *Most Improved, Beginners' Embroidery, Mrs. Tompkinson's Class*. Finally, the First Monk found a slightly worse-for-wear black quill, which he sent floating toward Sir Magnific.

"Sorry about that," said the First Monk, before adding: "Some people bring their own quill, you know. Saves a lot of trouble."

Sir Magnific was staring at the scroll. His name was printed in very large letters at the top, but everything else was written in very tiny letters, fading to microscopic. An educated ant would have struggled to make them out.

"Be sure to read through the small print," said the Third Monk. "We wouldn't want any misunderstandings."

"But it's *all* small print!" said Sir Magnific.

"What do you expect?" said the Second Monk. "It's not like we can just go around killing people without dotting the i's and crossing the t's. We're professionals, you know. We take pride in our work."

"It's not in English," said Sir Magnific. "Or Latin. Or even French. How am I supposed to understand it?"

"We didn't say you had to understand it," said the Third Monk, "just read it."

"And sign it," added the First Monk. "And I'll want my quill back after."

The Second Monk nudged him and hissed what might have been a laugh, or laughed what might have been a hiss.

"Not that you'll be needing it, um, after," said the First Monk. "Or be in much of a position to stop me from taking it."

Sir Magnific folded his arms, or tried as best he could, given how encumbered he was by metal.

"Well, I'm not signing it," he said. "That's a death warrant, that is. Nobody signs his own death warrant, except in metaphors. What are you going to do about that, then, eh? Not so clever now, are—"

There was a muffled explosion from inside Sir Magnific's armor. His visor fell down, obscuring his face, and puffs of blue smoke began to emerge from various cracks, holes, and grilles, followed by what could only have been liquefied bits of Sir Magnific himself. Finally, the now significantly lighter suit of armor tumbled to the ground, landing with a hollow *dang*. Button the horse looked relieved to be no longer carrying a few hundred pounds of combined man and metal on his back.

Orlic the Resigned just sighed. He'd known something like this was bound to happen some day. Okay, maybe without the monks, and the explosion, and that unsavory liquefying part, but something very much like it.

"It would be nice," said the First Monk, "if one person agreed to sign the warrant, just one. Hardly worth going to the trouble of getting it done and carting it halfway across the Multiverse if they're not even going to bother reading it, never mind sign it."

"It would also save a lot of paperwork later," said the Third Monk.

"Which is why we always forge their signatures," said the Second Monk, as the quill scribbled Sir Magnific's name at the bottom of the warrant before returning to its owner. "We hate paperwork."

"Oooh, that's naughty," said the Third Monk. He sounded quite shocked. "You can't go forging people's signatures. You'll get into trouble."

"We're assassins," said the First Monk. "Naughty—I mean, bad—is what we do, and we are trouble."

He turned to the Second Monk as assorted confused peasants faded from view.

"Right," he said, "who's next on the list?"

The Second Monk consulted a small journal. Embossed on the cover were the title *Your First Assassination Notebook* and an illustration of a unicorn pooing a rainbow.

"Nurd," said the Second Monk, "Scourge of Five Deities, or so it says here."

"Any deities we know?"

"None worth mentioning."

"He must have annoyed someone important to end up on our list."

"He did," said the Second Monk. "Old Mr Grumpy himself. The Big Badness."

"You don't say!" said the First Monk. "Dear oh dear. Tut-tut. Well, well. What was this Nurd fellow thinking? Some chaps just bring trouble down on themselves, don't they? Do we have the warrant?"

"I gave you all the warrants before we left," said the Second Monk.

The First Monk had another rummage in his sleeves, then inside his robes, and lastly *under* his robes, exploring from the knees up. The Second and Third Monks exchanged a glance worth a thousand words.

The First Monk gave a sharp tug. His hand reappeared holding a scroll, which he waved triumphantly at his colleagues, who took an alarmed step back.

"**What?**" said the First Monk. "**I have to keep them all somewhere, and there's only so much room in these sleeves. I think you could at least carry the quill in future. I've done myself some injuries with that quill. The end is very pointy.**"

He examined the scroll.

"**Nurd, Scourge of Five Deities,**" he read. "**To be terminated with extreme prejudice, along with his accomplices Wormwood and Crudford, Esq. I suppose it's official, then. Hang on, there's a footnote.**"

The First Monk leaned closer to the warrant. Deep in the hood of his robes, eyes of awful malevolence squinted. The First Monk kept meaning to get glasses, but could never find the time, what with all the murdering that needed to be done. There weren't enough hours in the day.

"**I do wish they'd make the print bigger,**" he said. "**This is how mistakes get made. We don't want to go assassinating the wrong person—er, again.**"

The other monks waited patiently while their leader deciphered the instructions.

"**Right,**" he said at last, "**the gist of it is that we're also supposed to kill a boy named Samuel Johnson, a dog called Boswell, and Dan's Stars of Diminished Stature, who are a bunch of little men, along with their manager, the aforementioned Dan.**"

"**How little are they?**" said the Second Monk.

"**Doesn't say.**"

"**What kind of dog?**" said the Third Monk.

"**Doesn't matter.**"

The First Monk rolled the warrant up. He thought about returning it to where he'd found it before remembering that—thanks to the late Sir Magnific—he now had an extra space in one of his sleeves, which was a relief. Some things come out a lot easier than they go back in.

"**We have a few other outstanding warrants to take care of along the way,**" he said. "**Then we can kill the boy, the dog, Dan and the little men, finish up with**

Nurd and the other two, and be home in time for tea." He rubbed his scraggy hands together. They rattled like bones in a sack.

"Really," he said, "what could possibly go wrong?"

- 1 *Also Cures Warts, Ingrown Toenails, Fiddler's Elbow, Housemaid's Knee, Dropsy, and Scrofula. Not to Be Taken Orally. If Swallowed Accidentally, Please Consult an Undertaker.*
- 2 See, I know stuff.
- 3 You, for example, may like Brussels sprouts. I think you're wrong. I also think they've made you smell a bit funny and other people are just too polite to mention it. But I'm not about to wallop you with a mace until you agree to come around to my way of thinking and concede that the whole Brussels sprouts business is a big mistake on your part. That would be grossly unfair. Mind you, don't get me started on cauliflower. Wave a piece of cauliflower in my direction and it'll be the last thing you do.
- 4 Not an actual dinner pail, but a turn of phrase meaning "died." See also: cash in one's chips, turn up one's toes, kick the bucket, buy the farm, push up daisies, pop one's clogs, etc., all of which suggest that death might be avoided by holding on to one's chips, keeping one's toes turned firmly downward, not booting buckets or other vessels used for the storage of liquids, refusing to purchase arable land, resisting the urge to shove skyward daisies or any other wildflowers, and not wearing clogs. Although one probably shouldn't wear clogs anyway because they look silly.
- 5 If someone says, "Hey, come over here and listen to the sound of this crocodile breathing," the correct answer is "No, thank you."
- 6 If someone says, "Take a look through this hole and tell me if you see a bloke with a bow and arrow," the correct answer is also "No, thank you."
- 7 Finally, if someone says, "Hold on to this crocodile for a minute while I run away from that bloke with the bow and arrow," the correct answer is... Yes, you guessed it. Well done. You get to keep all your limbs and organs.

II

In Which We Meet Some Old Friends

The travelers stood at the edge of a large forest, staring at a rippling portal in the continuum.⁸ The first traveler had a head shaped like a quarter moon, albeit a moon made of cheese that was slightly on the turn. The second looked like a squirrel with a skin ailment. The third was a clear, slug-like blob wearing a very fetching top hat. Odder trios might have been dotted around the Multiverse, but if so, they were about to face some stiff competition.

The three were, respectively, Nurd, Scourge of Five Deities; his faithful companion (in the absence of anyone else willing to take the job), Wormwood; and Crudford, a small, gelatinous entity of boundless optimism and wetness, as well as a committed wearer of hats. Since each had, to varying degrees, been responsible for foiling the efforts of the Great Malevolence to escape from the infernal regions and destroy the Multiverse, they were very unpopular with certain entities whose initials were GM. They were, in fact, among the most wanted beings in the Multiverse, if by “wanted” you meant “wanted dead,” but the most wanted of all was Nurd.

The trees were so tall that their crowns touched the sky, casting the ground below into shadow. The only light came from tiny luminous creatures that floated like parasols through the gloom, singing as they went. Unfortunately, they didn’t have a note in their heads, and couldn’t have carried a tune in a bucket. It made Nurd think fondly of the (in)famous boy band BoyStarz, but only because BoyStarz wasn’t anywhere nearby. Things could always be worse.⁹

Nurd, Wormwood, and Crudford were aware of their unpopularity with the Great Malevolence, which was why they tried not to linger too long in any one

location, although the Multiverse, as they were discovering, was endlessly fascinating, frequently beautiful, and often awe-inspiring, and one therefore occasionally felt the urge to potter about watching nebulae forming and stars collapsing. Then again, bits of the Multiverse were also kind of dull, and the bits that weren't dull, fascinating, beautiful, or awe-inspiring were sometimes dangerous. With this in mind, precautions had to be taken before progressing from one realm to the next.

"Right," said Nurd to Wormwood, "stick your head through that portal and tell us what you see."

Wormwood looked at the portal dubiously.

"Can't someone else do it this time?" he asked.

"No, it's your job," said Nurd. "We took a vote on it."

"I don't remember a vote."

"We had it while you were asleep. We didn't want to wake you."

"Aw," said Wormwood, "that was kind." He thought for a moment. "I think."

"Now, now," said Nurd, hustling him none-too-gently toward the portal, "don't get caught up with all that thinking nonsense. You know how your brain hurts when you do it."

"If it makes you happier," said Crudford, "you can wear my top hat."

Wormwood didn't believe that wearing the hat would make him feel any better about sticking his head through a hole between dimensions, but he turned out to be wrong. The top hat suited him better than expected. He examined his reflection in the portal, and thought he looked very dapper.

"What do you think?" he asked Nurd.

"You look like you're marketing a Monopoly set for rats."

Wormwood grinned happily.

"My dream," he said. "Right, I'm off to explore."

And with that he bent down, took a deep breath, and popped his head through the portal.

⁸ The continuum is the name given to the four-dimensional model that combines the three dimensions of space with the fourth of time. It's also sometimes referred to as Minkowski spacetime, after its

originator, Hermann Minkowski (1864–1909). Hermann’s brother, Oskar, was a physician and pioneer in the study of diabetes, and his son, Rudolph, became a noted astrophysicist. Another brother, Max, was the French consul in Königsberg, Prussia. Like me, you’re probably looking at your own family right now and shaking your head in disappointment.

- 9 Which brings us back, briefly to that spacetime business. Our galaxy—the Milky Way—and everything in it is falling in a swirly manner toward the huge black hole that sits at its heart. That black hole is about four million times the mass of our Sun, which itself is 1.989×10^{30} kilograms, or about 333,000 times the mass of Earth. But before you think that this sounds like a very good reason not to bother doing your homework, or taking that bath you’re always promising your mum you’ll get around to before Christmas, a single orbit of the black hole by the Milky Way takes about 250 million years to complete. Since the Sun is so large that it forces Earth into an orbit that takes a year, you now have a pretty clear idea of just how enormous our local neighbourhood black hole happens to be. In other words, we’re probably always going to be falling toward it without ever actually reaching it. So, tough break on the homework/bath avoidance front. Don’t forget to learn your French grammar, and remember to wash behind your ears.

III

In Which We Learn a Little About Gods

The Grand Oblat of Tern, High Priest of the Great God Murcius,¹⁰ stretched his horrid limbs, yawned from one of his several mouths, and prepared for another long day of doing his god's work. This mostly involved accepting gifts on Murcius's behalf, which Murcius, being a deity, didn't have much use for, a god's need for food, treasure, and slaves being limited. To save the worshippers any embarrassment, the Grand Oblat took all the gifts for himself, politely explaining that Murcius had made it very clear to the Grand Oblat that this was what he wanted.

The rest of the Grand Oblat's time was spent dealing with all those who didn't believe in the Great God Murcius.¹¹ This didn't tend to end well for them, the Grand Oblat's view being that the best way to deal with unbelievers was to kill them as quickly as possible so they could start explaining themselves to the Great God Murcius¹² in person.

Here's the funny thing about gods: they're only ever as good or as bad as the people who believe in them. There's nothing especially awful about gods or religion. It's people who make them that way. The Grand Oblat was a rotten sort, and had made the Great God Murcius in his own rotten image. Even the statues of Murcius that cluttered up every town and village in Tern had begun to look suspiciously like the Grand Oblat, right down to the color of his dressing gown.

Another thing about gods: they cease to exist if everyone stops believing in them, or at the very least they toddle off to do something more fun than listen to strangers ask for next week's lottery numbers or some help with trying to find

that missing screwdriver. But the Grand Oblat's power and wealth depended on everyone believing not only in Murcius but also in the Grand Oblat's direct line to Murcius's thoughts and wishes. For this reason, it was very important to the Grand Oblat that the population of Tern should keep believing in the Grand Oblat—sorry, in Murcius, Idolized Be, etc. (Easy mistake to make, that, what with all the statues that resembled the Grand Oblat. Still, you can't be too careful....)

So it was that the Grand Oblat had put on his best, most ornate dressing gown, and his newest, plunkest carpet slippers, and was now about to reveal the latest statue of Murcius/the Grand Oblat.¹³ A big white sheet concealed the statue, and large numbers of Ternians had gathered to witness the unveiling on pain of being tortured with hot pokers if they didn't, although tea would be served after.

One more thing about gods: they don't like competition. They have their own territories and their own followers, and they have reached an unspoken agreement that it would be best for all concerned if they didn't go about intruding on another god's patch.¹⁴ The Grand Oblat had forgotten this, and had been spreading the Word of Murcius rather too widely for some gods' liking. As a result, those rival gods had taken up a collection, and it wasn't for another statue of Murcius.

A hush descended on the crowd because the guards had begun heating pokers just in case of any latecomers, and nothing quiets a crowd like the prospect of hot pokers exploring their nethers. The Grand Oblat took the end of the cloth in one of his tentacles, cleared a number of his throats, and said, "I now declare this statue of the Great God Murcius unveiled!"

The cloth fell. The crowd gasped. The Grand Oblat looked confused.

The statue of—okay, let's stop beating around the bush here—the Grand Oblat had been vandalized, because the head had been removed and replaced with an orange. Admittedly, someone had taken the trouble to draw a smiley face on it, but it was definitely still an orange.

"Where's the head?" said the Grand Oblat as the air behind him burst with a *pop*. "It looks to me like it doesn't have one."

"**Yes,**" said the First Monk, "**about that...**"

-
- 10 Blessed Be His Many Tentacles, Holy Be His Cavernous Jaws, Adored Be His Fetching Red Cotton Dressing Gown and Matching Carpet Slippers.
- 11 Venerated Be His Seventy-Clawed Toes, Glorious Be His Jagged Horns, Revered Be His Nice Hat That He Keeps for Special Wear.
- 12 Cherished Be His— Oh, never mind. You get the picture.
- 13 Please delete as appropriate.
- 14 This message doesn't always get through to their believers, which is how wars start.

IV

In Which We Learn the Importance of Keeping One's Head, Although a Bit Late for the Grand Oblat

The Monks of Appalling Dreadfulness prepared to be on their way. Thanks to his missing head, the Grand Oblat now bore a much closer resemblance to his statue, even down to the orange. The Third Monk had drawn a frowny face on that one.

"Anyone else here fancy being a god?" the First Monk asked, facing the crowd.

There was an unsurprising absence of candidates.

"I didn't think so," said the First Monk as he started to disappear.

"It's more trouble than it's worth, being a god," said the Second Monk.
"Eventually, you always disappoint."

He, too, began to fade.

"Don't make us come back with more oranges," warned the Third Monk.

And then they were gone.

Nurd tapped his foot impatiently.

"So," he said to Wormwood, once the latter's head had grown back, "how did that go?"

"Not so good," said Wormwood. He felt his head, and was relieved to find that it had been restored to its previous state, even if no one else was. In another corner of the Multiverse, the Grand Oblat might have sympathized, except that the Grand Oblat was dead and so wasn't doing a lot of anything anymore.

"What did you see on the other side of the portal?" said Nurd.

"Well," said Wormwood, "I saw a mouth, and a lot of teeth, and then not much at all, really, until I saw you again just now with the new eyes in my new head."

"I don't suppose you managed to save my hat?" said Crudford.

"I'm afraid not," said Wormwood.

"Pity. Would you care to go back and have a—"

"No," said Wormwood, "I wouldn't."

"Just wondering. I was fond of it. It was very nice, and fitted me perfectly."

"That's as may be," said Wormwood, "but the same could be said for my old head."

"Don't exaggerate," said Nurd. "Whatever bit your head off was probably trying to do you a favor."

"Still, perhaps we ought to find a safer portal," said Crudford. "I'm sure there's another one around here somewhere."

"I suppose so," said Nurd. "I'm tempted to take my chances with that one, though. I can't stand much more of this racket."

A parasol floated by, warbling merrily. Nurd couldn't be certain because of the sheer tunelessness, but it sounded like "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean" sung by someone with a large spoon stuck in his mouth.

Nurd stared at Crudford, who was now wearing a black beret.

"Where do you get that from?" said Nurd.

"I don't know. They just seem to appear." He examined his reflection in the portal. "I feel a strange urge to take up the accordion."

"You do, and you'll be traveling alone," said Nurd. "There's no situation that can't be disimproved by the addition of an accordion." He poked Wormwood. "Come on, we'll go and look for a different portal. If we find one, Crudford, we'll whistle. You'll know it's us because it'll be in tune."

Nurd and Wormwood trotted off, Wormwood still warily stretching his neck to be sure that his head was on properly. It had once grown back the wrong way around and he'd spent a couple of hours bumping into things before he noticed.

You lived and learned.

V

In Which We Return to Biddlecombe Just in Time to Wish We Hadn't

The Monks of Appalling Dreadfulness materialized at the back of a packed Biddlecombe Palace, Home to the Stars. The Biddlecombe Palace was really a converted Boy Scouts hall, but its new owner, Mr. Pinchfist, had high hopes for it, and intended to transform it into the town's leading entertainment venue and tourist attraction.¹⁵ The Monks went unnoticed by all upon arrival as most of the audience was facing the stage, and also because the Monks were very accomplished at not being seen when they didn't want to be. This prevented their victims from running away or throwing stuff at them. It also cut down on the screaming.

On the stage, an amateur magician was sawing a girl in half.¹⁶ Worryingly, the amateur magician appeared to be in his mid-teens, and the saw, which was very rusty, didn't look much younger.

"I am now," said Samuel Johnson, for it was indeed he beneath a cape and a battered hat, "sawing my lovely assistant, Maria, in half."

Back and forth went the saw. "Ouch," went Maria.

"No, there shall be no mercy, no matter how loud you shout!" said Samuel, laying it on fairly thick for the crowd while whispering to Maria, "Keep it up, they're loving it!"

"Ouch," said Maria again, this time with more feeling. "Is it supposed to hurt?"

"What?" said Samuel. "No, I don't think so."

"Well, perhaps you ought to stop, then."

"I wondered what the saw was catching on," said Samuel. "I knew I should have paid more attention to the instructions in the book."

Samuel ceased sawing.

"I shall now," said Samuel, "stop sawing. Good night, and thank you."

The curtain came down. The members of the audience exchanged puzzled glances. Applause burst from somewhere in the middle of the auditorium. It came from Samuel's mother, who was just glad that her son no longer had a saw in his hand. Maria's parents joined in, thankful that their daughter was still in one piece and not two.

"**Is that it?**" said the First Monk. "**At least we didn't pay for tickets.**"

"**Was that Samuel Johnson?**" said the Second Monk.

"**Without a doubt,**" said the First Monk. "**Without a dog, too. Did you see what he was up to with that saw? Lucky we're going to be killing him soon, save him from getting arrested. His loss will be magic's gain.**"

Lights flashed over the curtain. Glitter was scattered across the stage from a bucket by a man in overalls at the top of on an unsteady ladder. A voice announced: "And now, ladies and gentleman, the act you've all been waiting for..."

The Monks noticed a couple of people making for the doors, only to be forced back to their seats by security.

"Our very special guests, fresh from their pantomime tour of Latvia..."

Over at the far wall, a man tried to climb out a window before his wife pulled him back inside and told him to suffer like everybody else.

"With a new single on the way..."

"Please, no," someone moaned.

"I give you..."

"Bring the magician back," said someone else. "He can saw me in half. It'll be a mercy."

But the announcer was not to be dissuaded

"BoyStarz!"

The curtain rose again to reveal the four members of BoyStarz, Britain's seventeenth Most Popular Boy Band.¹⁷ The years were not being kind to them, ...

for they were no longer a) boys or b) starz, but continued to scrape a living in places desperate for entertainment, but only if all the paint in town had already dried. A backing track began to play. It was a slow song, because all BoyStarz's songs were slow, even the fast ones. Every song they sang concerned falling in love, falling out of love, looking back on love, searching for love, tripping over love, losing love behind the sofa, or watching love being eaten by lions. A BoyStarz concert was like the worst Valentine's Day of your life compressed into ninety minutes.

Thankfully, that evening's performance was limited to just three songs, but it was still at least three songs too many. Halfway through the first song, tormented wailing was heard, and not just from the stage. By the second song, Row C had already formed an escape committee and begun work on a tunnel, and a man in Row E had withdrawn to his happy place, never to return. But at the end of the performance—after lead vocalist Starlight had strained to reach the final high note of "Swept From the Chimney of Your Love," failed, tried again, grasped it, and strangled it to death—a huge round of relieved applause sent the group from the stage, because people are mostly polite and BoyStarz had promised not to come back for an encore.

The Monks of Appalling Dreadfulness, who had retreated into the foulest, darkest depths of their robes, peered cautiously from their hoods.

"**I think it's over,**" said the First Monk.

"**I don't feel well,**" said the Second Monk. "**And my ears have gone funny.**"

"**I think I nearly liked it,**" said the Third Monk, who was already trying to come up with an alternative name for their own band, The Monks of Appalling Dreadfulness being unlikely to cut it in the hit parade.

"**Perhaps we should kill BoyStarz as well,**" said the First Monk, "**just to be sure.**"

Nobody raised an objection, the Second Monk being of the same opinion as the First, and the Third being happy to get rid of the competition. At that moment, raised voices were heard from the corridor outside, and the Monks gloomed in that general direction to see what the fuss was about. They found four small men, accompanied by a larger man wearing thick glasses and a T-shirt bearing the word "Manager" on the front. They were arguing with a sixth man

in a suit. The small men were, the Monks guessed, Dan's Stars of Diminished Stature, formerly known as Mr. Merryweather's Elves, and also sometimes as "the accused."

In the background hovered BoyStarz, Samuel Johnson, a dachshund, and Samuel's assistant (and girlfriend), Maria, who was now wearing a sticking plaster on her right side. The argument seemed to be about money.

"I'm not handing over cash for that lot," said the man in the suit, jabbing a thumb at BoyStarz. "They were terrible."

"What did you expect, Pinchfist?" said one of the little men. "They're BoyStarz. Everyone knows they're terrible."

"But not *that* terrible. I mean, they sound bad on television, and they're not much better on record, but live and up close—" Pinchfist shuddered. "I'll never think of a chimney the same way again."

"We had a contract," said another of the little men.

"For entertainment. That wasn't entertainment, not unless you like the sound of weeping."

"But the money is going to charity," said Maria. "It'll save donkeys."

"The donkeys," said Pinchfist, "will just have to save themselves."

Even the Monks, who were among the most pitiless beings in the Multiverse, thought this was very harsh.

"So you're not going to pay?" said the first little man.

Pinchfist lit a cigar and took a long puff.

"No, Mr. Jolly Smallpants," he said, "I most certainly am not."

The Monks of Appalling Dreadfulness stood by the side of the road, watching as Dan's Stars of Diminished Stature reduced the Biddlecombe Palace to firewood and broken bricks. For little people, the First Monk reflected, they were remarkably strong, and once they committed to a task, they finished it. Mr. Pinchfist could only sit and watch, since he had been tied to a chair with an apple in his mouth. Behind him, BoyStarz hummed a sad song.

"Perhaps," said the First Monk, "**we could deal with the footnote at a later date.**"

"Or even forget about it altogether," said the Second Monk, because some jobs were more bother than they were worth.

"Yes," said the First Monk, "**that might be for the best.**" They'd still be paid for taking care of Nurd, Scourge of Five Deities, and someone else could just deal with the boy, the dog, the manager, and the little men.

Especially the little men.

The Monks of Appalling Dreadfulness gradually dematerialized, to the sound of the Third Monk whistling the chorus of "Swept From the Chimney of Your Love."

"Stop that," said the First Monk.

So the Third Monk just whistled it quietly in his head instead, and dreamed of stardom.

¹⁵ Better, even, than Rocky's House of Rocks. ("For all your rock needs. Stones and pebbles also available. Boulders by order only.")

¹⁶ You don't want to see the words "amateur," "sawing," and "girl" in the same sentence. You don't even want to see the words "professional," "sawing," and "girl" used too often. It's a tricky business, magic. (Ha, see what I did there?) On March 23, 1918, the magician William Ellsworth Robinson was performing a famous illusion in which he was sentenced to be shot to death by a member of the audience. The gun had a concealed second barrel, so that the audience member loaded the first barrel with a real bullet, but the gun actually fired a blank from the second barrel. Unfortunately, Robinson hadn't cleaned the gun properly, and both barrels fired simultaneously when the trigger was pulled. Robinson's last words were "Something's happened. Lower the curtain." It should be noted that Robinson, a New Yorker of Scottish heritage, was dressed as a Chinese person at the time. WARNING: DO NOT TRY THIS AT HOME. The gun part, I mean. And the dressing up as a Chinese person. Unless you're actually Chinese, in which case it's probably okay.

¹⁷ Of fifteen.

VI

In Which the Monks of Appalling Dreadfulness... Well, You'll See

On an icy fjord in Norway, Valgar the Unpleasant, nastiest and most terrifying of Vikings, possessor of the legendary Hinged Helmet of Hrangar the Hrungr¹⁸y, consumed another deer leg. He wondered when his dinner would arrive, because he was tired of snacking and was in need of something more substantial. He also had to be up early in the morning because those villages weren't going to pillage themselves.

Valgar was alone in his throne room. Valgar was often alone because nobody liked him. Also, Valgar sometimes got bored and killed whoever happened to be standing nearby, so it was best to keep one's distance. For this reason, his food wasn't so much served as thrown at him.

Even by the standards of bad men, Valgar was incredibly bad. He was so bad that he discouraged other people from being bad, like a runner who is so fast that nobody wants to race against him anymore since there's no point in turning up only to be humiliated. Valgar's extreme badness meant that there was actually *less* badness in the Multiverse because of him, as a lot of people who might otherwise have been bad had gone off to do something else instead, like grow lettuce or foster widdle bunny rabbits. For this reason, a contract had been taken out on Valgar the Unpleasant, which was why he was suddenly distracted from matters of the stomach by the sight of three monks standing before him. Valgar hated monks, but then Valgar hated everybody, so it was nothing personal.

"**Valgar the Unpleasant?**" said the First Monk.

“Only my friends call me that,” said Valgar.

“**But you don’t have any friends,**” said the Second Monk.

“That’s right, because I’ve killed them all,” said Valgar. “And I *liked* them. I don’t even *know* you.”

He grabbed a huge axe that stood by his throne.

“That’s why I’m going to cut you into pieces,” said Valgar, “and use your pelvises as cake stands.”

“**Before you go putting yourself to any effort,**” said the First Monk, producing a parchment, “**we are the Monks of Appalling Dreadfulness, and we have good news and bad news for you.**”

Valgar frowned.

“I’ll take the good news first,” he said.

“**It’s interesting you should say that,**” said the Second Monk, “**because the good news and bad news are both the same. You know that spectacular Viking funeral you were looking forward to when you died, with lots of feasting and dancing and fires and stuff?**”

“Yes?” said Valgar.

“**Well,**” said the First Monk, “**it’s just been brought forward.**”

Back at the portal, Crudford was still inspecting his reflection while positioning his beret at new and interesting angles to consider the result. He tried to recall some French, but failed. He was wondering how he might go about acquiring a striped jersey when three gray shapes shimmered into being beside him.

“**Hello,**” said the First Monk.

“Hello,” said Crudford, who liked meeting new people.

“**We’re looking,**” said the Second Monk, “**for Nurd, Scourge of Five Deities.**”

“What do you want him for?” said Crudford.

“**Well, funny enough, we want to kill him.**”

“Why is that funny?” said Crudford.

“**Because he probably doesn’t want to be killed,**” said the Second Monk.
“**Although if he does, that would be funny, too.**”

"Technically," said the First Monk, "since he's an arcane entity, we won't so much be killing him as excising him, but it amounts to the same thing."

"It's official," said the Third Monk. **"We have a warrant and all."**

On cue, the First Monk produced the warrant. He'd worried about the Third Monk at the start, but he really seemed to be getting the hang of things now.

"Who are you, exactly?" said Crudford.

"We," said the First Monk, **"are the Monks of Appalling Dreadfulness."**

Crudford appeared puzzled. He lifted his beret and scratched the top of his head. Being gelatinous, his fingers passed straight through and floated somewhere behind his eyes.

"Does that mean you're appalling at being dreadful?" he said. "Because I wouldn't go boasting about something like that, if I were you."

"No," said the Second Monk patiently, **"it means that we're not just dreadful, but really, really dreadful."**

"As in being capable of inspiring dread," said the Third Monk, **"not being bad at something. Because we're very good at being bad. Grrrrr,"** he added.

"If you say so," said Crudford, "but I'd still rethink the name. And why are you going around killing people?"

"It's what we do," said the Second Monk. **"We are the Multiverse's most feared transdimensional assassins."**

"We used to be the second most feared," said the First Monk, **"until a mountain fell on the Nuns of Eternal Doom. Then everybody moved up a place."**

"Well, we say 'fell' on the Nuns of Eternal Doom," said the Second Monk, **"but it was more 'pushed,' or even 'dropped.'"**

"Still, congratulations," said Crudford. "It's always nice to see talent rewarded."

"Thank you," said the Monks of Appalling Dreadfulness in unison.

"So," said the First Monk, getting back on track, **"this Nurd, do you know him?"**

"What does he look like?" said Crudford.

The First Monk tapped the warrant, and an image of Nurd appeared in the air. It wasn't a very flattering picture, so it was Nurd down to a T.

"You know, I think I have seen him," said Crudford. "Does he pal around with a scruffy demon called Wormwood?"

"That's the one!" said the Second Monk.

"And there is another who travels with them—" began the Third Monk, but Crudford cut him off before he could proceed any further.

"They were messing around with this portal," said Crudford, "just before you arrived."

"You're sure?" said the First Monk.

"I saw that Wormwood stick his head through not ten minutes ago," said Crudford. "Cross my heart and hope to dry."

The First Monk turned to his colleagues.

"Righty-ho, lads," he said. **"Let's get this done."** He patted Crudford on the shoulder, or the part of Crudford that most resembled a shoulder. **"Thanks for the help. You've made our lives a lot easier."**

"Oh, I do hope so," said Crudford.

The First Monk stepped through the portal, followed quickly by the Second. The Third Monk paused at the threshold and peered at Crudford.

"This Crudford, Esq. who travels with Nurd and Wormwood wears a hat," said the Third Monk suspiciously. **"Or so I've heard."**

"This isn't a hat," said Crudford. "It's a beret."

"Ah," said the Third Monk, **"of course. Sorry, my mistake."**

"Don't mention it," said Crudford, as the Third Monk entered the portal. **"Au revoir."**

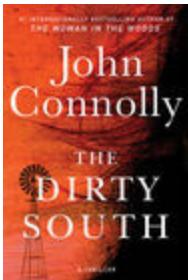
For a moment, Crudford thought he heard the sound of chomping from the other side of the portal, but he might have been mistaken.

"No," he said "**"au revoir'** isn't right," as a whistle from nearby indicated that Nurd and Wormwood had found another portal. "Never mind, it'll come to me."

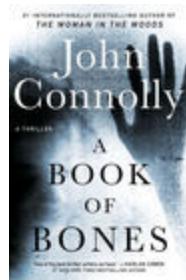
Crudford oozed happily in the direction of the whistling, and wondered where he might find a bicycle and a string of onions.

-
- 18 Hrinterestingly—sorry, interestingly—the image of Vikings wearing horned helmets isn’t historically accurate, and dates back only to the late nineteenth century. We can possibly blame Carl Emil Doepler, who designed the costumes for a performance of Wagner’s opera *Der Ring des Nibelungen* in 1876, and gave horned helmets to Wotan, god of battle, and the Valkyrie. Another myth is that the Vikings put their dead chieftains in boats, floated them on a lake or river, and set them on fire with flaming arrows. Duh, wrong! Think about it. It takes a lot of dry wood and heat to keep a big blaze going, especially if you’re hoping to burn a body, and you’re just not going to have enough of that on a Viking longboat, even if you load it with extra wood. Either the fire will go out or the boat will sink, and what are you going to do then, huh? You think Uncle Olaf, charred and damp, would thank you for that kind of botched send-off? I suspect not.

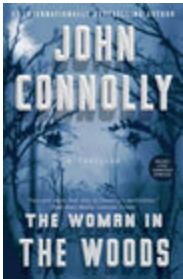
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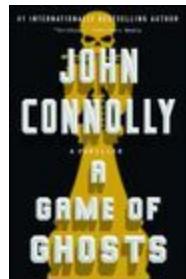
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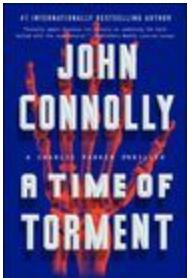
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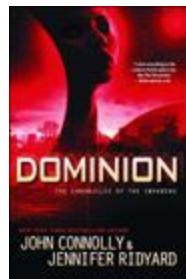
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